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SUBJECT: CHOOSING THE OPPOSITION'S UNIFIED CANDIDATE

REF: CARACAS 1993

Classified By: Abelardo A. Arias, Political Counselor, for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

Summary

11. (C) The opposition is focusing all efforts toward a united front for the August 15 recall referendum. Opposition leaders told the Ambassador in early June that they will wait to announce a candidate until after the referendum because the referendum is a Chavez/anti-Chavez vote. The opposition is developing strategies to decide who would be the opposition's unified candidate in a presidential election 30 days after the referendum, and how that candidate would be chosen. They are considering three mechanisms to choose the candidate: polling, primary, or caucus. End summary.

Meet the Candidates

12. (C) When the GoV created the reparos process, there were splits within the opposition regarding the proper reaction. Primero Justicia and Proyecto Venezuela voiced concern about the validity of the reparos process, but then worked with the Democratic Coordinator (CD) in the reparos process. After the success of the reparos, the opposition is united. Enrique Mendoza, Miranda state governor and strong opposition voice, supported the reparos process and has as a result improved his standing as a leading presidential candidate for the opposition. AD leader Henry Ramos told the Ambassador on June 9 that he believes that the unified candidate will be Mendoza.

13. (C) Henrique Salas Romer and Julio Borges are two other contenders to be the unified opposition candidate. Salas's popularity and credibility suffered after he initially rejected the reparos process. He has grudgingly backtracked and now is part of the united CD. Salas, still a dissenting voice in the CD, told the Ambassador that although he was quoted as saying that the opposition's only focus now must be the referendum, he thinks that a unified candidate should be picked before August 15. Borges is still a prominent CD voice, but he is younger than the other contenders and is believed to be waiting for later opportunities.

Election/Selection Procedures

14. (C) If the opposition recalls President Chavez in the August 15 referendum, they will have one more challenge - a presidential election in 30 days. Statements from GoV officials, including the Supreme Court, indicate that Chavez will be able to run in this election although it has not been officially determined. Whether Chavez can run or not, the opposition's prospects are best if they can choose one candidate to run against him, thus avoiding splitting opposition votes between several candidates. The process to choose the opposition unified candidate will determine the credibility and legitimacy of the opposition's bid to win the presidential election. While the CD is debating the process now, it will wait until after the referendum to choose a unified candidate. As Mendoza told the Ambassador on June 9, the CD views the referendum as a vote for or against Chavez. Presenting a candidate now could risk political divisions within the CD. In addition, the opposition will not gain any political advantage by presenting one candidate now. There appears to be no candidate at the moment who will be able to mobilize all opposition parties for the referendum. After the August 15 referendum, the opposition plans to use the following week to enact its selection procedure.

15. (C) Fernando Martinez Mottola (protect), a businessman and member of the opposition "brain trust" who is leading CD efforts to choose a unified candidate, described three

procedural options - polling, primary, or caucus, to poll off

on June 9. Polling would be a "poll of polls." Four major polling companies in Venezuela would survey the country to find the top opposition candidate. To address questions of legitimacy, the opposition would only use this strategy if one candidate clearly emerged in the next two months and if the results of the four polls provided a distinct candidate. Primaries would be a national vote to choose the opposition candidate. The opposition could limit the voting to people who signed the petition for the recall referendum. However, to increase legitimacy, the opposition could allow all Venezuelans to vote for the opposition candidate (comparable to an American-style open primary). A caucus process would invite 6,000 to 10,000 members of civil society to Caracas to select a candidate. The participants would represent all sectors of society and be from all parts of Venezuela.

16. (C) Martinez believes that the polling option will be suitable because one candidate will emerge over the next two months. If a poll is not possible because there is no clear candidate, Martinez would support a primary because it will give credibility to the process and the operational capacity for voting should be available after the August 15 referendum. In all meetings with the Ambassador and polooffs, opposition leaders have highlighted the role of Sumate and its importance as a key coordinator in any referendum and election process. See refTel on GoV efforts to harass Sumate and prosecute leadership on conspiracy charges.

Comment

17. (C) The opposition's first priority right now is mobilizing people for the August 15 recall referendum. While the CD is planning for a possible presidential election, it is not publicly talking about plans. For the unified candidate selection process, the biggest challenge for the opposition is time. If the opposition does not choose a candidate until after August 15, then the opposition has 30 days to choose a candidate and campaign for that candidate. Credibility and legitimacy of the selection process is another key concern. Whatever option is chosen, the process must be deemed credible to motivate Venezuelans to support the unified opposition candidate.

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